

The Case of Bookcases

In this post David Beer reflects on what the attention given to bookcases during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals about our enduring attachments to particular surfaces, spaces and presences and their role in the materiality of research, writing and teaching.

This post, originally published in the author's [‘Fragments of Modernity’ newsletter](#), and appeared on the LSE Review of Book's [Materiality of Research](#) series.

Solitude-networking is throwing up lots of new visual cues, especially as we see inside people's homes. The now prominent genre of home-located-video-link-interview content has brought the bookcase some detailed attention. Situated in the background, the bookcase has become the mise-en-scene of the political classes (and academics and celebrities too). The book backdrop is both a handy representation of symbolic knowledge, a marker of cultural cachet and a source of analysis for those seeking to understand the particular individual who occupies the foreground. The canvas upon which media pronouncements are made and the source of debate and mockery on social media, the bookcase has found its place in the remote dialogues and two-dimensional interactions of social distancing.



Professor Robert Dingwall, featured on the popular twitter account Bookcase Credibility

I'd probably aim for the same type of scenery, if I could. My video calls are backed by a blank wall. This is no proclamation and nor is it a choice. It is by no means an attempt to subvert or make a statement on the selfconsciously-situated bookcase. I have only a small number at home: my book collection is almost entirely housed in my work office. Locked in. Limited space at home and an attempt to demarcate home and work space have kept me in the habit of only bringing a book or two home at any one time. My book collection exists only at work – a space that I imagined would always be accessible. Those many images of crammed shelves remind me of my books.

I sometimes, in the moments of daydreaming, imagine my office. Empty and dark. The walls lined with my books. The tools of the trade, left unused. It's a small and inconsequential problem, but it does make me think of how work has been transformed now and possibly in the future.

The shelved volumes aren't just functional; I have an attachment to those books as well. They are comforting somehow. I know their content is there for me to call upon if I need it. Their presence on my shelves also acts as a reminder of what I might hope to aim for, a little reminder of one possible endpoint for writing work.

Blog homepage: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/>

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Featured Image Credit: Book shelf of the author.
